



Council of Alberta University Students
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November 12, 2015

Wildrose Caucus Office
Legislative Branch
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Dear Wildrose MLAs:

In light of the Wildrose Party AGM tomorrow, Friday, November 13th, we write to you to express our concerns regarding a proposed policy amendment that would see optional membership in students' associations added to the Wildrose policy book.

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of 100,000 undergraduate university students in Alberta from five institutions – MacEwan University, Mount Royal University, the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge.

CAUS strives to maintain a strong relationship with all political parties, including the Wildrose Party. We have had great support from many of your colleagues in the past. Recently, Advanced Education Critic, MLA Wes Taylor, introduced our delegates during Question Period and last year, MLA Blake Pedersen would frequently ask questions about tuition and fees on behalf of the students we represent in Question Period. Every year since the formation of the Wildrose Party - even before the party had elected MLAs - we have had thoughtful and important policy discussion with your party on post-secondary education issues in Alberta. We value our relationship with your party and hope that you will take the time to consider our concerns. We intend to clear up what we see as misunderstandings with how our organizations work and we would like to explain the true function and nature of our organizations.

We are particularly concerned about policy proposal #7, which reads:

“Wildrose members believe the Government of Alberta should: 11. ... Amend the Post-Secondary Learning Act to allow every student to choose whether or not he/she wishes to become a dues-paying member of a student association, in each year of enrollment at a post-secondary education institute.”

CAUS believes this to be misguided for three distinct reasons, outlined below:

Our role as fiscal watch-dogs

The proposal claims that students' associations are similar to “any public sector union” and that our dues are “often used to advance certain, often progressive, political agenda” wherein “students end up paying for political ideology”. We wholeheartedly disagree. In fact, we find common ground with the WRP on issues of accountability and fiscal responsibility. Students' associations are typically the only organizations that strive to keep post-secondary institutions accountable. We work extremely hard to ensure that students and the public know exactly where taxpayer and student dollars, in the form of tuition and fees, go.

To address the issue of what students pay for advocacy, we would like to note that only a very small portion of students' association budgets go towards advocacy, which we again note is non-partisan and involves building strong relationships with political parties of all stripes. As examples, the University of Alberta Students' Union allocates just over 6% of their total operating budget to advocacy, the University of Calgary Students' Union allocates roughly 3%, and the Students' Association of MacEwan University allocates approximately 5%. This represents advocacy efforts at the municipal, provincial, and federal level and includes the fees that these students' associations pay for membership in their provincial advocacy organization, CAUS, as well as their federal advocacy organization, the Canadian Alliance of Students' Associations (CASA). Further, all these funds are used for non-partisan advocacy in support of what our elected representatives judge to be in students' interest.

From meetings that we have had with Wildrose MLAs in the past, it is clear we agree that student associations have a distinct role in keeping school administrations' spending public and student funds in check. Both our provincial advocacy organization, CAUS, and our individual student associations are non-partisan advocates that routinely serve as effective watchdogs of public dollars. In fact, student advocacy is often the only voice against institution largess and abhorrent activity, such as the misspending scandal at Medicine Hat College – concerns were only brought to light because the Students Association of Medicine Hat College had the legislated authority to represent every student.

In addition, our organizations are very transparent with our own spending – our budgets are fully available to our members and we, as elected student representatives, are more than happy to speak to students individually should they wish to know more about how their fees are spent. In fact, most students associations in Alberta use referenda to make decisions about student fees. We strive to be good stewards of money, hoping to serve as a model for our institutions.

Our role as non-partisan advocates

The proposal also outlines how the Wildrose Party can do more to attract and retain young people (specifically referenced in point #2). While we do not speak for a party's goals, CAUS agrees with the principle that greater participation in all political parties by young people is a very positive thing. However we are unsure as to how this goal aligns with

removing mandatory membership in student associations. In addition, point #3 in the proposal notes the difficulty conservative parties have faced in attracting young people. While this is not CAUS' place to comment, we do wish to highlight that conservative parties have contributed to positive change in the post-secondary sector. For example, the Conservative Party of Canada has made positive changes to the Canada Student Loan Program over the years, thereby increasing access for many students.

Essentially, we do not believe that the way to attract young people and to develop sound policy ideas lies at the expense of students' associations. In fact, in line with our fiduciary responsibility as advocates, we present all parties with viable policy solutions. Students' associations in Alberta are already limited to advocating on issues related to the purposes of the institution, as outlined in the *Post-Secondary Learning Act*. This precludes us from advocating on issues that are not relevant to students at our schools.

Moreover, all students' association elections are open to any student who wishes to contest a seat. Many students' associations also offer resources, financial and otherwise, to student groups so that students of any background can come together and associate. There is opportunity for students of any political background to create a campus club and students' associations, especially in Alberta, are not necessarily or unilaterally "left wing" in any way whatsoever. We would urge the movers of this policy proposal to demonstrate specific examples of partisanship. And, in the event that students' associations *are* advancing ideas counter to a student's own political principles, students' associations provide additional mechanisms for these concerns to be raised. For example, at the University of Calgary Students' Union, there is an open policy proposal process whereby referenda, plebiscites, and petitions can all be used by any student.

We provide core services for students

Finally, we wish to address the proposal's concerns about freedom of choice and "compulsive legislation". First, students' associations are not akin to public sector unions; we are service providers, business owners, and advocates. Opting out of a students' association is parallel to attempting to opt out of a municipality on the premise that one disagrees with the political views of the leadership. Students' associations are legitimate, democratically elected, governing bodies similar to municipalities – both are created by an act of the provincial legislature. Additionally, there are provisions at many organizations where members can opt-out of specific fees/services, such as the health and dental plans.

Not only do we provide services, many of which are essential to a positive and productive higher education experience, we offer services at a cost far cheaper than institutions ever could, given that we are free from cost pressures created by institutional bargaining agreements. We would hope that Wildrose members could find common cause with this.

If this proposal ever became law, it could bankrupt many smaller students' associations, especially in rural areas and at smaller institutions, thereby leaving those students without services and support. This would severely disadvantage post-secondary students at smaller

institutions outside of Edmonton and Calgary. In fact, many associations have secured loans and mortgages against reliable student fee income. A loss in this income would result in job losses for many students and full time staff employed by students' associations. For instance, the University of Alberta Students' Union has over 200 staff and employs almost 100 full time staff in order to provide 30,000 undergraduates with essential services. Having a student body comprised of members and non-members of the students' association would be logistically complicated as, theoretically, students who have declined their memberships would be able to enter buildings owned by students' associations, use services that not all students know are offered by students' association (such as peer-to-peer counselling), and would not be able to participate in the hundreds of clubs available on larger university campuses which have been formed through the students' association.

In conclusion, we urge you to re-consider and oppose this policy proposal. Students' associations are integral in keeping post-secondary administrations accountable; we ensure all students have access to our governance models; and we provide key services to thousands of students. Indeed, if there is ever a doubt that students' associations are not responsibly upholding their legislated mandate to advocate for students, the *Act* has a provision for government to investigate them.

Sincerely,



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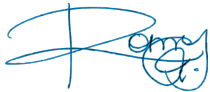
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